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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: MORE ON MILITARY RESHUFFLE -- THAI ARMY PUTS
APOLITICAL OFFICERS IN CHARGE OF KEY UNITS

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 120

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 4373

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 4277

[1](#)D. BANGKOK 4211

Classified By: Charge Alex A. Arvizu. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Thai Army officers, civilian defense analysts and other observers almost uniformly view the July 17 Army reshuffle as a deft move by Royal Thai Army (RTA) CINC GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin to ensure that key battalion-level commanders and their subordinates in the capital environs are loyal to the King and to RTA HQ, i.e. to GEN Sonthi. Clearly the reshuffle was designed by GEN Sonthi to preempt possible power plays by some Army elements close to beleaguered caretaker PM Thaksin. By virtue of his identification as a protector of the Palace, GEN Sonthi is widely viewed as one of the "good guys" in the political spectrum, and the July 17 Army appointments are generally seen as contributing to a positive resolution of the ongoing political drama rather than aggravating it. Even so, it is remarkable that in 2006 the military -- and the institution of the monarchy, for that matter -- remain for better or for worse critical determinants in Thai politics. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

[1](#)2. (C) Due to Thailand's history of military intervention in the political process, analysts have been watching the RTA closely for any signs of it stepping in to resolve the present political stalemate. During the last such interventions in 1991 and 1992, RTA units based near Bangkok, particularly the 1st Infantry Division and the 4th Cavalry Division, led a coup and violently put down protests. Critics of PM Thaksin Shinawatra have long expressed concern that the commanding generals of key Divisions near Bangkok are Thaksin loyalists. For instance, MG Prin Suwanathat, the commanding general of the First Infantry Division, is a well-known Thaksin loyalist and pre-cadet prep school classmate of the Prime Minister. Analysts point out that patronage is important in the RTA. Flag officers loyal to Thaksin, like Prin, have had several years to groom battalion commanders who are presumably loyal directly to their commanding general and indirectly to the Prime Minister.

[1](#)3. (C) In Thailand, military and police officers are extremely loyal to their pre-cadet preparatory school classmates. These high-school groupings usually engender closer ties than an officer holds towards his military or police academy class. Regular prep class reunions are prime

networking events (For instance, on July 27 -- Thaksin's birthday -- his class held a party in the Prime Minister's honor). Throughout their careers, classmates help each other in countless ways. In fact, previous coups have generally involved officers from the same class. Thaksin, while preparing for a career as a National Police officer, was a member of Prep Class Ten. Many -- although not all -- of Thaksin's RTA classmates are loyal to the Prime Minister and are grateful for his patronage which has allowed them to be promoted ahead of graduates from earlier classes. In a country where a military officer can generally expect to be promoted according to seniority, this patronage has caused a great deal of resentment among members of more senior prep classes who believe that Thaksin has "broken the rules" by favoring his cronies. During the ongoing political turmoil, this resentment between Class Ten Thaksin supporters and others has led to speculation that pro-Thaksin officers might step in to salvage their advantaged position.

¶4. (C) Most RTA officers who will express an opinion dislike the Prime Minister. Notably, Thai officers pledge allegiance to the Monarchy, not the Constitution, when they are commissioned. Further exacerbating tensions between the majority in the RTA and the pro PM minority is the perception that Thaksin and his loyalists are insulting esteemed former military officers like Privy Councillor and former RTA CINC GEN Surayud Chulanont and Privy Councillor and former Prime Minister GEN Prem Tinsulanond. It is widely speculated that Surayud and Prem were instrumental in shaping the King's unfavorable view of Thaksin.

DEFANGING THE DRAGON

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¶5. (C) Thailand's defense establishment has been abuzz analyzing what many describe as a master stroke by the Commander in Chief of the Army, GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin, to reduce the likelihood that Thaksin supporters in the RTA might make a move orchestrated by the Prime Minister. On July 17, by using his administrative power to shuffle mid-level officers, Sonthi transferred 129 RTA Lieutenant Colonels and Colonels to new assignments. Included among those officers were five battalion commanders from the First Army Region which includes the area around Bangkok. Reftel A discusses how this reshuffle was also used in the Third Army Region, in Northwest Thailand, to reduce the influence of Thaksin loyalists there. Sonthi's move was likely approved by Prem who, on July 14 in a speech to military cadets, likened Thaksin's government to a jockey who simply rides the horse of state which is owned by the country and the King (ref C).

¶6. (C) A senior RTA contact described the reshuffle as one which "defangs the dragon." According to the officer, even though several Thaksin loyalists are Division commanders in or around Bangkok, by shuffling the officers who actually command combat units and ensuring that key battalion commanders are known to Sonthi and the mainstream of the RTA, Sonthi has made it virtually impossible for a commanding general to be sure his subordinate would obey any order to move in support of the Prime Minister.

STILL NO LOVE LOST BETWEEN THE OLD GUARD AND THE PM

¶7. (C) The tension between Thaksin and senior and retired RTA officers is significant. A senior RTA officer in the Royal Thai Supreme Command (RTSC) recently told us confidentially that he and others are convinced that Thaksin

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and his supporters monitor the electronic communications of Prem, Surayud and others. Our source also suggested that anti-Thaksin members of the RTA are monitoring the Prime Minister as well.

COMMENT: WHAT WOULD CAUSE THE MILITARY TO INTERVENE?

18. (C) "What would cause the Army to step in?" When asking this question, Embassy officers have emphasized the importance of the Army staying out of politics and allowing the democratic process to play out. We have not hesitated to point out how Army intervention could damage Thailand's relationship with the United States. Uniformly, senior officers from Sonthi on down have told us that the RTA has come a long way since 1991 and would be extremely unlikely to stage a coup. However, one RTSC general officer -- a very reliable U.S. contact whose professional sense of duty has impressed us over the years -- told us in a moment of candor that if Thaksin made a move that was interpreted as disloyal to the King, then the Army might have little choice but to intervene by removing Thaksin from the political scene, and quickly call for a new government to be appointed or elected.

Our contact stressed that he viewed such a scenario as remote, especially in light of recent developments, i.e. the royal decree announcing a general election on October 15, and the guilty verdict returned by the Criminal Court against the three members of the Election Commission, which many interpret as a necessary step toward increasing the chances of a fair election.

19. (C) Much of the recent intra-Army wrangling has been aggravated by the uncertain political climate, including by Thaksin's efforts to politicize the military during his time in office. The good news is that the prospects for a decent political outcome have improved considerably in light of recent developments, including GEN Sonthi's preemptive reshuffle of July 17. All the same, for all the real progress made in strengthening Thailand's democratic institutions since 1991-92, the Army is still a major factor in the political scene.

ARVIZU